
Article:
Thouki, A. (2022) Heritagization of religious sites: in search of visitor agency and the dialectics underlying heritage planning assemblages. International Journal of Heritage Studies, 28 (9). pp. 1036-1065. ISSN 1352-7258

https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2022.2122535

International Journal of Heritage Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjhs20

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To cite this article: Alexis Thouki (2022) Heritagization of religious sites: in search of visitor agency and the dialectics underlying heritage planning assemblages, International Journal of Heritage Studies, 28:9, 1036-1065, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2022.2122535

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2022.2122535

Published online: 15 Sep 2022.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HERITAGE STUDIES
2022, VOL. 28, NO. 9, 1036–1065
https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2022.2122535

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Heritagization of religious sites: in search of visitor agency and the dialectics underlying heritage planning assemblages

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ABSTRACT

The heritagization of religious sites has been increasingly studied in recent decades, with the focus shifting from the impact of mass tourism to considering the appropriation and commodification of religious sites as processes characterised by institutional dynamics and conflicting values. Drawing on an integrative-synthetic review as its methodological backbone, through critical heritage theory, advocating an epistemological turn towards post-secular strategies, this conceptual paper explores how the complex relationship between heritage, religion and tourism has been discussed and problematised by a growing literature addressing the heritagization of religious sites. Findings show that previous work has been limited to examining issues of commodification and living religion highlighting a hybrid sacred/secular space, while few researchers have addressed issues of conservation and authenticity. This is evident in the lack of qualitative studies examining the impact of gentrification, restoration and curatorial strategies in the way religious sites are experienced. Thus, the agency of visitors to construct alternative narratives is concealed, while there remains uncertainty regarding the multiplicity of institutional mechanisms influencing conservation assemblages. The paper concludes that research needs to further engage with the dialectics that underpin religious heritage planning assemblages and critically examine the epistemological assumptions under which religious heritage consumption have been considered.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 December 2021
Accepted 5 September 2022

KEYWORDS
Heritagization; religious sites; management; authorised heritage discourse; authenticity; critical realism

1. Introduction

The term 'heritagization' emerged in the late twentieth century, to denote a transformative and historically contingent process, by which historic artefacts and places turn into objects of display and exhibition with an effect in the present (Harvey 2008; Harrison 2013). Considering 'heritage as a process' (Howard 2003) or heritage as an 'intangible event' (Smith 2015), the heritage discourse shifts from what heritage is to what heritage does. This processual understanding of heritage making (filtered through collection, institutionalisation, commodification, and protection) underscores an analysis of how contemporary societies use the past, what they forget, remember, memorise, fake and who is considered as heir (Harvey 2001, 2008; Howard 2003; Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2005; Smith 2006). This lens makes social scientists develop a more nuanced understanding of the politics of heritage (or politics of recognition) which occur around the rights to control expressions of cultural identity, access, and sovereignty (Smith 2006, 2007).

Discussions around heritagization are fuelled by a critique of the institutionalisation and reappropriation of the past (Howard 2003). This critique began in the late 1980s when Wright

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(1985) Hewison (1987) and Walsh (1992) professed that heritagization signifies historical continuity and cultural homogenisation, through the beautification of acceptable national themes, that 'reduces' the real space to tourist space. In the last two decades, heritagization has encompassed a variety of fields including the heritagization of historic urban (Grimwade and Carter 2000; Silva 2011; Högberg 2012; Said, Aksah, and Ismail 2013; Chapagain 2017) and rural landscapes (Isnart 2012; Milan 2017; Tena and García-Esparza 2018; Dabezies 2018), addressing issues of sustainable development and living communities. Other areas include 'dark heritage', which refers to sites marked by tragedies that have become places of commemoration (Mentec and Zhang 2017; Becker 2019), the heritagization of pilgrimage (routes) (Mu, Nepal, and Lai 2019; Øian 2019), addressing the transformation of traditional pilgrimage routes into negotiated 'heritage itineraries' (Di Giovine and Choe 2019), and the heritagization of food (Guan, Gao, and Zhang 2019; Porciani 2019), where traditional food practices are instrumentalized within national discourses. This field of study commonly involves an effort to investigate the dissonance (competing narratives) found during the management of heritage resources (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), such as the tensions between 'experts' and marginalised groups, stakeholders' conflicting motivations, as well as the pros (economic and social regeneration) and cons (over management, commodification and gentrification) of heritagization (Smith 2006; Hall 2006; Leask 2006; Ashworth 2008; Silva 2011; Rajapakse 2018). This dynamic and ongoing processes of negotiation and experimentation infiltrated the study of religious heritage in the 1990s, when the anthropological focus on religious tourism and pilgrimage (Smith 1992; Eade 1992; Nolan and Nolan 1992; Rinschede 1992) moved towards the implications of religious tourism, with scholars (Winter and Gasson 1996; Vukonic´ 1996; Shackley 1998) addressing the spatial, sociological, and economic causality between tourism and religious settings. Since then, there has been a great emphasis on the impact of mass tourism, as well as the efforts of managers to retain religious sites as living, self-sustained, hybrid spiritual and cultural spaces.

An underdeveloped area in this field of study is an analysis of the structural forces, discourse, and agency that shapes religious destinations. This paper aims to call into question the dialectics developed in the production and consumption of religious sites, which as Bianchi (2009) argued could fuel critique over hegemonic discourses, cultural practices, and tourists subjectivities. In doing so this paper revisits the 'living' dimension of religious heritage – a term that has been linked in recent years with communities and the continuity of traditions (Wijesuriya 2018). As Isnart and Cerezales (2020) argued, entering heritage-making religious sites remain ritually effective without there being any loss of their religious value, while heritagization adds another layer of meaning to religious sites, making them hypermeaningful sites and self-aware of their wider values (Isnart 2008; Di Giovine and Garcia-Fuentes 2016). While this process signals a resurgence of interest in visiting sacred places, it also holds stakeholders publicly accountable to reintroduce religious sites into the public realm as a 'valuable source to be remembered' (Meyer 2020, 65). This new status quo that frames religious sites within institutional frameworks, characterised by a new conservation ethos and museological endeavours (Di Giovine and Garcia-Fuentes 2016), sparks tensions between religious tradition and secular management strategies that often turn religious rituals into spectacles customised and adapted to tourists' taste (Zhu 2020; Rico 2021). Drawing on the well-documented management challenges at religious sites, this paper explores the dialectics of religious heritage by examining how existing scholarship has addressed the agency (goals, values, power, control) of social actors to influence conservation assemblages as well as the agency of 'users' to challenge such strategies.

2. Conceptual framework

Religious sites are at the core of the definition of heritage since they were the first places to be considered as heritage in many countries and one of the most represented groups in the World Heritage List (Labadi 2013). This hybridisation, or 'duality of space' as described by Bremer

(2001, 3), that signals the convergence of sacred and secular activities, raises new challenges related to funding, conservation, maintenance, education, and recreation (Olsen and Esplin 2020). With few exceptions (Di Giovine 2008; Clarke and Raffay 2015; Di Giovine and Choe 2019; Eade 2020) that have questioned the epistemological basis on which the heritagization of religious sites is discussed, and a small but growing literature that has demonstrated the discomfort of 'users' towards the commodification (Di Giovine 2012; Dora 2012; Levi and Kocher 2012; Su, Song, and Sigley 2019; Zhu 2020) and presentation (Voase 2007; Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2009) of religious sites, more research is needed regarding the discursive nature of religious heritage and how it is transformed and challenged by new and old social actors and 'users' (Wu and Hou 2015; Samuels 2015; Zhu 2020). Embracing what Isnart and Cerezales (2020) described as the intangible turn in cultural policy (emphasising rituals, uses of space, memories and temporalities) this study asserts that future research will better explore what host communities and visitors understand as 'authentic' conservation by embracing the living, negotiable and evolving character of religious sites, or as Byrne (2019) proposed, the 'ontological differences' between worshipers and heritage practitioners. In this paper, the term 'conservation' will be used in its broader sense, an all-encompassing term (an alias for cultural heritage management), shifting the discussion towards what counts as authentic, what we value more today and what kind of destination images we want to craft (Vinas 2002; Orbaşli 2008).

The emphasis on religious heritage dialectics is in line with an epistemological shift called for in religious heritage, whereby the voice of religion should not be merely recognised, but also engaged – balancing faith and conservation on the same grounds and considering religious value as an intrinsic rather than an 'exogenous force' that requires mitigation (Rico 2021; Zhu 2021). This perspective is aligned to critical heritage theory that envisages understanding the myriad discourses at historic sites. Scholars such as Smith (2006, 2009), Pendlebury (2013), Harrison (2013) and Di Giovine (2015) maintain that ascribing agency to 'heritage users' (individual act of will) could provide insight on alternative narratives that might have been concealed. Such an approach can explore how different agencies and social structures are manifested within assemblages and how their realities are mixed and merged to shape heritagization. Accordingly, the paper reviews a growing body of literature, examining the heritagization of religious sites in an integrative and synthetic manner through the lens of Critical Realism – a non-deterministic and non-reductionist philosophy that emphasises the context-dependent nature of consciousness and the contingent and contextual configuration of mechanisms and structures in the production of events (Sayer 1992; Platenkamp and Botterill 2013).

3. Methodology

This paper is structured as an integrative review underpinned by Critical Realist philosophy, which encourages researchers to engage with a broad body of literature without any strict inclusion or exclusion criteria, aiming to combine perspectives and create new theoretical models (Torraco 2016; Edgley et al. 2016; Snyder 2019). Thus, empirical studies, as well as debates, are scrutinised initially based on tentative, rather than firm review questions (Edgley et al. 2016). The integrative-synthetic approach taken helped the researcher to explore how existing investigations have addressed the agency of social actors and 'users' at both the macro and micro level of heritagization. Such an initiative is encouraged by Labrador and Silberman (2018), who urge scholars to push the paradigmatic boundaries, emphasising the multiplicity of coexistent ontologies and questioning how heritage is understood, valued, restored, and communicated (Pickering 2017; Labrador and Silberman 2018).

The literature that directly addresses the 'heritagization' of religious sites does so from a narrow perspective. The paper takes a wider angle, drawing on the extensive publication of secondary sources comprising predominantly of English-language works such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters that discuss issues related to the management of religious sites

between 1996 and 2022. The review draws on databases such as Web of Science, SCOPUS, Google Scholar as well as prominent journals in the field. Some of the keywords and phrases used include 'religious/ecclesiastical [cultural] heritage', 'religious tourism', 'management', 'living religion', 'pilgrimage', 'interpretation', 'conservation' and a combination of those terms using Boolean operators (and, or and not). The snowball technique was also used following citations of prominent papers in the field.

Although several different perspectives may be adopted for examining the literature, such as theological, archaeological, or sociological, the chosen conceptual model reflects a management perspective. In line with Ashworth and Howard (1999), this approach aims to explore how we use the past, which of these 'uses' overlap and to identify the methods, background, and motives of those involved in each case, emphasising the discursive nature of religious heritage. Regarding empirical studies, the first set of analysis identified papers that discuss themes related to 'religious built heritage'. In order to avoid oversimplifying the complexity surrounding Indigenous sites by homogenising a very diverse phenomenon that should be examined within the broader environmental preservation issue (Carmichael, Hubert, and Reeves 1994), spiritual sites including sacred landscapes, springs, mountain peaks and other non-monumental sites located in wild locations, have not been included as they are not directly comparable to single nodal sacral sites such as temples and monasteries. The second phase involved the summarisation, evaluation, and synthesis of the literature by comparing information found within the 81 empirical works. This phase entailed deconstructing the topic into its basic conceptual themes (operational management, policy making, visitors' perspectives) and methodological approaches (data collection techniques and analysis). Summary tables were used for data extraction and rigorous synthesis of the reviewed works (see Table 1). Olsen's (2006) argument regarding internal and external management issues has been utilised as a 'tentative' framework to flesh out how the agency of social actors and religious heritage 'users' has been explored. A limitation of this methodology is its exclusive use of online journal articles and scholarly monographs to ensure academic integrity which may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant grey literature produced by academics and practitioners. Additionally, due to the emphasis on religious 'built heritage', the study may have overlooked monumental Indigenous sites that did not result from 'religion', thus future research is encouraged to make greater use of derivatives of this concept.

4. Results

The integrative-synthetic approach adopted in this paper surfaced three recurring conceptual themes that helped the researcher to explore how existing scholarship has addressed the agency of social actors and 'users' in relation to the heritagization of religious sites at the micro and macro levels. *Operational Management* addresses the various ways managers attract, welcome, and mitigate the impact of mass tourism, as well as their efforts to retain religious sites as a living, self-sustained, spiritual, and cultural centre. *Policy Making* goes one step further, exploring the institutional dynamics, the value stratification and the other dynamics developed during heritagization. These are 'offsite' aspects that influence the ways in which religious sites are managed, conserved, and interpreted to the public by major stakeholders (Olsen 2006). *Visitors' Perspectives* is recruited as a broader term to explore how existing scholarship has explored 'users' perceived expectations and experiences as well as responses and attitudes towards current strategies.

4.1 Operational management

The issue of the commodification of religious sites has received considerable critical attention; scholars (Eade 1992; McGettigan and Burns 2001; Vukonic 2002; Shackley 2001, 2002, 2005; Bremer 2005; Timothy and Olsen 2006; Levi and Kocher 2012; Coleman 2019) have discussed how commercial activities, such as admission fees, blur the spiritual and temporal perimeter

Table 1. Summary of relevant literature.

	Author (s)	Year	Location	Empirical Focus	Methods
1	Winter, M. and Gasson, R.	1996	UK	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey
2	Muresan, A.	1998	Romania	Operational Management and Visitors' Perspectives	Mix Method
3	Carlisle, S.	1998	Ethiopia	Operational Management and Policy Making	Secondary Sources
4	McGettigan, F and Burns, K.	2001	Ireland	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
5	Olsen, D. H and Timothy, D. J	2002	USA	Operational Management	Observations/Interviews (Key Actors)
6	Miura, K.	2005	Cambodia	Policy Making	Ethnography
7	Wijesuriya, G.	2005	Sri Lanka	Policy Making	Archival Research/Secondary Sources
8	Irvine, J. H.	2005	Australia	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)
9	Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell, D.	2006	Israel	Operational Management/Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
10	Winter, T.	2007	Cambodia	Policy Making/Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors and Visitors)
11	Pavicic, J. et al.	2007	Croatia	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)
12	Voase, R.	2007	UK	Interpretation	Interviews (Visitors-Focus Group)
13	Isnart, C.	2008	France	Operational Management	Ethnography
14	Brajer	2008	Denmark	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey
15	Di Giovine, M. A.	2009	Southeast Asia and Europe	Visitors' Perspectives/Operational Management/Policy Making	Ethnography
16	Poria et al.	2009	Israel	Interpretation	Mix Method
17	Olsen, H. D.	2009	USA	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)/Secondary Sources
18	Rivera et al.	2009	USA	Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
19	Andriotis, K.	2009	Greece	Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
20	Ieronymidou and Rickeby	2010	Cyprus	Operational Management	Ethnographic approach
21	Francis et al.	2010	UK	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
22	Presti, O and Petrillo, C. S	2010	Italy	Policy Making	Secondary Sources
23	Di Giovine, M. A.	2010	Italy	Operational Management and Visitors' Perspectives	Ethnography: Interviews (Key Actors and Visitors)
24	Poria et al.	2011	Israel	Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
25	Warrack, S.	2011	Cambodia	Operational Management	Ethnography
26	Griffiths, M.	2011	Australia	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
27	Zhu, Y.	2012	China	Operational Management	Ethnography
28	Levi, D. and Kocher, S.	2012	Thailand	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
29	Berliner, D.	2012	Laos	Visitors' Perspectives/Operational Management	Ethnography: Interviews with tourists, experts, and locals
30	Wiltshier, P. and Clarke. A.	2012	Hungary and England	Operational Management/Visitors' Perspectives	Interviews (Key Actors)/Observations/Secondary Sources
31	Hughes et al.	2012	UK	Interpretation	Survey (Visitors)
32	Dora, D. V.	2012	Greece	Operational Management/Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
33	Shinde, K.	2012	India	Policy Making	Mix method
34	Shepherd, R. J.	2013	China	Policy Making/Operational Management	Ethnography
35	Alexopoulos, G.	2013	Greece	Policy Making	Interviews (Key Actors)
36	Othman et al.	2013	UK	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
37	Abbate, C. S. and S. D. Nuovo	2013	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
38	Yara Saifi, Y and Yüceerm H	2013	Cyprus	Policy Making	Interviews/Observations
39	Tucker, H and Carnegie, E	2013	Turkey	Interpretation	Interviews (Guides, Museum Staff, Visitors)
40	Wong et al.	2013	China	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Author (s)	Year	Location	Empirical Focus	Methods
41	Wiltshier, P.	2014	UK	Visitors' Perspectives	Mixed method
42	Rodrigues, S and McIntosh, A.	2014	New Zealand	Operational Management and Visitors' Perspectives	Interviews (Visitors)/Nuns
43	Karlström, A	2015	Laos	Policy Making	Ethnography
44	Marine-Roig, E.	2015	Spain	Visitors' Perspectives	Quantitative Content Analysis (Online Reviews)
45	Collins-Kreiner, N. et al.	2015	Israel	Policy Making	Interviews (Key Actors)
46	Clarke, A and Raffay, A	2015	Hungary	Policy Making	Interviews
47	Nyaupane et al.	2015	Nepal	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
48	Wiltshier, P	2015	UK	Operational Management	Interviews (Staff and Volunteers)
49	Kocyigit, M.	2016	Turkey	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
50	Božic et al.	2016	Serbia	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
51	Ndivo, R and Cantoni, L.	2016	Ethiopia	Visitors' Perspectives	Content Analysis (Online Reviews)
52	Zhu, Y.	2016	China	Policy Making	Ethnography
53	Curtis, S.	2016	UK	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)/Secondary Sources
54	Salazar, N. B.	2016	Indonesia	Policy Making	Ethnography
55	Banica, M	2016	Romania	Visitors' Perspectives	Ethnographic Approach (Observations/Interviews)
56	Irimias et al.	2016	Hungary	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
57	Wiltshier, P and Griffiths, M.	2016	UK	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)/Observations
58	Canoves, G and Prat Forga, M.	2016	Spain	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
59	Orekat, F.	2016	Jordan	Operational Management and Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
60	Öter, Z and Çetinkaya, M. Y.	2016	Turkey	Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
61	Davison, K and Russell, J.	2017	Ireland	Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
62	Astor et al.	2017	Spain	Policy Making	Historical Analysis (Secondary Sources)
63	Trampedach, K.	2018	Denmark	Operational Management/Policy Making	Observations/Secondary Sources
64	Ramírez, R. R. and Fernández, M. P	2018	Spain	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
65	Aulet S. and Vital. D	2018	Spain	Operational Management	Observations/Interviews (Key Actors)/Archival Research
66	Simon, C. and Bowman, M.	2019	UK	Operational Management	Mix method
67	Coleman, C.	2019	UK	Operational Management and Visitors' Perspectives	Mix method
68	Thouki, A.	2019	Cyprus, Spain, and UK	Interpretation	Thematic Analysis (In Situ Labels and Guidebooks)
69	Mikaelson, L.	2019	Norway	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)/Secondary Sources
70	Duda, T and Doburzynski, D.	2019	European Holy sites	Visitors' Perspectives	Survey (Visitors)
71	Sabri, R and Olagoke, O. A	2019	Nigeria	Policy Making	Mix method
72	Su et al.	2019	China	Operational Management/Policy Making	Ethnography
73	Knippenberg, K. V., M. Duineveld, and M, Buizer	2019	Netherland	Policy Making	Mix method
74	Spaarschuh, H. and Kempton, M.	2020	Norway	Operational Management	Interviews (Key Actors)
75	Clopot, C.	2020	Romania	Policy Making	Observations/Interviews

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Author (s)	Year	Location	Empirical Focus	Methods
76	Tapia, A. A.	2020	Turkey	Policy Making	Observations/Secondary Data
77	Lofgren, E.and Wetterberg, O.	2020	Sweden	Policy Making	Secondary Data
78	Oliveira, M. G and Luzia, I.	2020	Portugal	Policy Making	Mix method
79	Yanata, K and Sharpley, R.	2021	Japan	Operational Management	Interviews and Observations (Key Actors)
80	Chang, H.	2021	Taiwan – China	Operational Management and Visitors' Perspectives	Interviews/Secondary Data
81	Weibel, D.L.	2022	France	Operational Management and Visitors' Perspectives	Ethnography

between spiritual centres and profane society. Shackley recruited Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' (Shackley 2005, 351), a counter-arrangement of societal normativity, to address the impact of secularisation on the sanctity of the place and point out the disturbance of 'spiritual magnetism'. This new reality, marked by objectification and commercialisation, has intrigued scholars to examine the new role religious sites are expected to play in the shifting context of the heritage industry, forming 'indirect economies of exchange' (Bremer 2001, 427), where 'instead of money being passed between parties, religious teachings and feelings are exchanged' (Olsen 2003, 101). Heritagization is capable of revitalising traditional religious places, breathing new life into myths through festivals, museums, and conservation programs (Isnart 2008; Tapia 2020). This 'convenient symbiosis' (Vukonic 2002, 64) has today become the *modus vivendi* at religious sites, providing financial revenue to subsidise the mission of the church (Olsen 2003; Woodward 2004; Rotherham 2007; Shackley 2008; Wiltshier and Griffiths 2016) as well as a beneficial economic impact to local communities (Carlisle 1998; Uriely, Israeli, and Reichel 2003; Kurmanaliyeva, Rysbekova, and Izmailov 2014; Kilipiris and Dermetzopoulos 2016) also described as 'reverential development' - a process that combines reverence, sanctity and spiritual growth with contemporary economic, cultural and social agendas (Singh and Rana 2022).

Empirical studies (Irvine 2005; Curtis 2016; Wiltshier and Griffiths 2016), drawing on semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, have demonstrated that traditional clergy consider money as a necessary means to mobilise their mission, 'a necessary intrusion in sacred business' (Irvine 2005, 27), while in other cases, financial need is blended with spiritual mission. As Yanata and Sharpley (2021) noted, although the phenomenon of the 'temple stay experience' at the Koyasan Mountain temple complex in Japan is driven primarily by a financial need, it is framed as a commodifying religious praxis and an opportunity to fulfil their mission to share Buddhist teaching. Thus, in many cases, religious managers adopt an 'enterprise culture' that requires churches to remain competitive in the broader cultural heritage industry (Wiltshier and Clarke 2012; Wiltshier and Griffiths 2016). This is evident in the various secular events in English Cathedrals, forming a 'broader alliance' between politicians, locals and national authorities in promoting religious sites as pilgrimage destinations (Mikaelsson 2019, 116). Nevertheless, it should be noted that religious sites are not always undercapitalised, and this is especially true of prominent spiritual centres where in certain cases religious bodies function as promoters of religious tourism (Trono 2015).

Heritagization necessitates new codes of interaction, as pilgrims are often prevented from touching, kissing, burning incense and leaving offerings (Di Giovine and Garcia-Fuentes 2016). Retaining the living character of spiritual sites is a headache for managers who aim to mitigate the impact of visitors' unconventional behaviour and insensitivity. Some of the problems managers face include unconventional behaviours and unbalanced sacredness, disturbance and nuisance caused by non-worshiping tourists, ecological concerns resulting from the environmental impact of mass religious tourism, changes to the temple's ecosystem and climate due to human presence, exploitation of local communities, increasing maintenance costs, the use of religious tourism for proselytisation purposes as well as the lack of tourism-related management training (Muresan 1998; Shackley 1998, 1999, 2002, 2005; Digance 2003; Feldman 2007; Winter 2007; Rotherham 2007; Timothy 2011; Olsen 2009; Stausberg 2011; Curtis 2016; Olsen and Esplin 2020; Rickerby 2021). The literature reports different measures that have been deployed by managers including the prevention of on-site commercial activities, such as the case of Lourdes in France (Olsen 2003), and the installation of pay perimeters allowing non-worshipers to access the church (Pavicic, Alfirevic, and Batarelo 2007). In the United Kingdom English Cathedrals appear to be more susceptible to appropriation and commercialisation (Digance 2006), adopting a 'community development approach' emphasising customer-oriented practices, pay perimeters, queue controls, and temporary closures (Stausberg 2011; Wiltshier 2015; Wiltshier and Griffiths 2016; Curtis 2016). The impact of these physical limitations on rituals and the devotional power of religious objects and how this might constrain the 'religious man' to steer himself away from what Eliade (1959) would

describe as the 'chaos of homogeneity', are also worth exploring. It should also be noted that spiritually driven agendas and ethical considerations also impact management decisions. Such agendas include the prioritisation of certain teachings and practices as more authentic than others (Olsen 2003; Olsen and Esplin 2020), how nearby secular buildings (souvenir shops) should be located in relation to the sacred site (Rotherham 2007; Curtis 2016; Coleman and Olsen 2021), whereas others initiate (anti-secular) coping strategies, such as treating guests to the extent possible in accordance with authentic practices (such as serving vegetarian food) (Yanata and Sharpley 2021). Lastly, the recent disruptive restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic causing the paucity of liturgical actions has also raised new challenges. The silencing of church bells, as intangible soundmarks of community 'soundscapes' ascribed with heritage values (Spennemann and Murray 2022), as well as the inventive practices of Greek Orthodox communities to develop their own 'private liturgies' by crafting and venerating icons in their own domestic context (Papantoniou and Vionis 2020), demonstrate both the fragility and evolving character of religious tradition. This ongoing debate between commodification and authenticity call to mind how Ashworth (2009) critically questioned whether it is indeed tourists who destroy the heritage they visit, or whether such damage is a result of bad management.

Progressively religious sites have launched well-developed management plans, which include tourist-related infrastructures and activities aimed to inform, educate, and proselytise secular tourists (Olsen 2009; Curtis 2016; Wiltshier and Clarke 2012; Wiltshier and Griffiths 2016). In a large survey comprising 500 visitors in various holy places in Europe, Duda and Doburzynski (2019) found that 30% of pilgrims and 80% of tourists reported needing helping in interpreting the site. Drawing on ideas of public engagement and audience development, and in line with the new conservation ethos that considers interpretation as an essential attribute in the conservation process (ICOMOS 2008), interpretation today is seen as an important element of the management of religious sites (Cohen 2006; Curtis 2016; Thouki 2019; Aulet and Vidal 2018; Coleman 2019; Duda 2021). In recent years, religious sites have made substantial progress in communicating their stories through printed material, placards, and interactive technologies with a view to offer personalised information (Duda 2021). A growing literature in this area discusses the dissonance that underpins those narratives. It is often the case that due to the mission goals or agendas of religious authorities, certain teachings, practices and interpretations are advanced as more authentic than others (Olsen 2003; Khaksari, Lee, and Lee 2014; Olsen and Esplin 2020). Drawing on the World Heritage sites of Cappadocia (Modern Turkey) and Mormon religious sites in Ohio, Tucker and Carnegie (2014) and Olsen and Timothy (2002) respectively found that certain narratives are concealed while others are appropriated to underpin specific claims of authenticity and rights to a religious past. This is particularly evident at UNESCO sites were the new 'peace making' social structure of UNESCO downplays tensions, creating 'imagined communities' by propagating non-conflicting meanings (Di Giovine 2008, 127). In a comparative study that examined the interpretative material found at Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches in the UK, Spain and Cyprus, respectively, Thouki (2019) noticed a reciprocal relationship between religious traditions and the stance assumed by different doctrines towards the modern and postmodern cultural curatorial paradigm. In line with Harrison's notion of 'ontological perspectives' (Harrison 2015, 27), the author asserted that the ontological standpoints of religious leaders should be considered as a parameter in the way information is presented to tourists. This is further supported by Antohin (2019) discussing how Orthodox churches form their own discourses in relation to heritage preservation and tourism agendas.

Regarding the operational management there is still considerable ambiguity on how ethical and theistic restraints influence decision-making. For instance, whereas religious sites are usually undercapitalised due to a shrinking congregation, some churches, such as those of the Christian Orthodox tradition, express an aversion towards admission fees. How this theistic limiter exaggerates the dependency of the church on the state forming new allegiances and dependencies is also worth exploring. In these margins another neglected area is the documented absence of museum

theory within this literature, exploring the re-interpretation and re-contextualisation (museumification) of sacred objects to aesthetic objects framed within a western secular discourse (Paine 2013). Topics that could provide fertile discussion in the way heritagization historizes and objectifies religious sites include the efficacy, or the divine agency of holy objects to create a special devotional bond (Berns 2016; Byrne 2019), how visitors relate to devotional objects and who is responsible for their curation (Paine 2013). Selecting appropriate curatorial strategies is far from straight forward especially in sites that evoke ideological, spiritual, and personal beliefs, values, and feelings (Uzzell and Ballantyne 1998; Charman 2013). Considering the 'spiritualisation of heritage' is at work at religious sites as well, constituting them open and meaningful to people from varied cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations (Bowman and Sepp 2019), museum theory could provoke fruitful dialogues and debates that can enhance more reflective and constructive heritage practices at religious sites regarding the role of interpretation as 'necessary' mediators of visitors' experience.

4.2 Policy planning

The growing interest of stakeholders in the management of religious sites is marked by a constant negotiation to adjust professional aspirations to the needs of living religion and modern conservation ethos (Hammer 2017; Zhu 2020). Research around 'the politics of heritagization' has been growing in the last decade. Empirical studies in this field (Winter 2007; Presti and Petrillo 2010; Wiltshier and Clarke 2012; Shinde 2012; Olsen and Ron 2013; Alexopoulos 2013; Clarke and Raffay 2015; Collins-Kreiner, Shmueli, and Gal 2015; Jimura 2016; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Coleman and Bowman 2019; Bhat 2019; Su, Song, and Sigley 2019; Oliveira and Luzia 2020; Löfgren and Wetterberg 2020) have proposed to map out the multipositionality and roles ascribed to different stakeholders and the discourses that frame religious sites as heritage. The scholarship is driven by qualitative, and to a lesser extent, mixed-method methodological approaches that draw predominantly on semi-structured or in-depth interviews with key actors (religious managers, quasi-religious entrepreneurs, and national or international officials), document analysis, and observations, while the preferable research design is case study and ethnography.

Addressing the macro level of heritage-making, research could unpack what Clarke and Raffay (2015) termed as the dialectics of multipositionality in the co-creation process of religious heritage sites. Dissonance and contestation between local and international stakeholders are evident around the globe, especially at sites that have an upgraded status due to their world heritage designation. Such cases include the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia (Miura 2005; Winter 2007; Di Giovine 2008; Warrack 2011), where the new legislative and bureaucratic structures that favour monumental conservation over living tradition freeze the site as a historic palimpsest, exaggerating its museumification. Another example is that of Mount Emei and the Wudang Mountains in China where the autonomy of religious institutions has been weakened due to the involvement of new more powerful stakeholders, resulting in significant administrative changes such as admission and conservation fees (Zhu 2020). Thus, heritage experts frequently prioritise certain stakeholder groups, such as monks, over residents (Su, Song, and Sigley 2019). Heritage law is often met with strong resistance by affected communities. Alexopoulos (2013) and Clarke and Raffay (2015), examining conservation strategies at Mount Athos (Greece) and tourist developments in Hungary, respectively, highlighted the confrontation between different value systems and the difficulty to adjust secular aspirations to the needs of living monastic communities, with the latter asserting strong resistance in issues of conservation and tourist development. As Collins-Kreiner, Shmueli, and Gal (2015) argued, such conflicts arise when the development at religious sites is perceived as a threat to the sanctity of the place. Cases such as the historic city of Jerusalem (Olsen and Ron 2013), the religious heritage in Indonesia (Salazar 2016), Qatar (Rico 2020) and Cyprus (Sabri and Sakalli 2021), demonstrate the fragile relationship between stakeholders and the difficulty in forming inclusive heritage assemblages in politically disputed sites, which are ascribed different value and meanings by social actors. Strategies to mitigate this dissonance include the

promotion of a 'pseudo-secular' approach that satisfies both the sacred and the city's tourism narrative, such as the case of Haifa's Bahá'í Gardens (Israel) (Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell 2006), whereas in multireligious countries such as Nigeria (Sabri and Olagoke 2019), authorities maintain a secular heritage metanarrative that is 'safely rooted in an uncontroversial past', (62) allowing communities the freedom to interpret and adapt conservation to their traditions. In instances when the state or international bodies fail to provide adequate support, religious actors or the international community (via international legal instruments) step forward to protect those sites in the absence of adequate policy and institutional framework (Shinde 2012; Tsivolas 2017; Di Giovine 2021).

Scholarship regarding the conservation of Indigenous sacred sites indicates the difficulties Indigenous people face in having their discourses manifested and eventually operationalised. As Fairclough (2005) explained, the failure to incorporate certain discourses within strategies is down to hegemonic struggles developed between social groups, depending on the resonance of those discourses and the resilience of the institutional structures that carry them. Karlström (2005) and Byrne (2008, 2011) demonstrated how Thailand's popular religion, shaped by animistic beliefs regarding decay and rebirth as crucial to the celebration of life call for the ceremonial destruction of Buddhist temples – a practice alien to the Western 'preserve as found' metanarrative. Discussing issues of impermanence and authenticity in Buddhist pagodas, Byrne (2008) and Peleggi (2012) explained that, through consecration, spiritual aura has the capacity to transmit to new replicas: thus, authenticity is 'to be found in continuity, but not necessarily only in the continuity of material' (UNESCO 2007, 4). Driven by these alternative perceptions of originality, Karlström (2015) delves further into the notion of authenticity, calling future research to reconsider this 'slippery' notion through the lens of 'performative authenticity', emphasising embodied experience rather than the material based and constructivist approach that falls short of acknowledging other worldviews rooted in popular religious practices (Karlström 2015). One such example is the conservation of damaged murals in Byzantine Churches of Cyprus. At this part of the world clergy's advocacy for the restoration of sensitive details, such as the damaged eyes or fingers of saints on murals, are considered by the authorities as intrusive restorations that conceal important historic phrases such as iconoclasm or talismanic practices (Ieronymidou and Rickerby 2010).

Evidence of community-based initiatives is also found in the literature especially in instances when locals take control of tourist practices. Initiatives in Naples (Italy) and the Kii mountains in Japan to form stakeholder associations (Presti and Petrillo 2010; Jimura 2016) appeared beneficial in coordinating different cultural activities and promoting involvement. According to these studies, such strategies could provide a sustainable co-management that raises problems from a religious and secular base, promoting community pride and a sense of belonging. As Zhu (2020) demonstrated in relation to China's spiritual sites, one important parameter in such bottom-up endeavours corresponds to the economic opportunities arising from heritagization, as commodification offers new opportunities for local entrepreneurs, monks, and tourism officials to participate and benefit from this instrumental usage of religion. In certain cases, such as Luang Prabang (Laos) and the Buddhist Gompa (monastery) in Lo Manthang, commodification is allied to a living tradition, where host communities adapt to the needs of the tourist economy (Singh 2004; Byrne 1995; Berliner 2012). Thus, transactions are considered a new norm for those sites, and even an opportunity to rebuild and restore their sacred buildings (Levi and Kocher 2012; Shepherd 2013). In this context, drawing on the seminal works of Turner and Turner (1978) and that of Eade and Sallnow (2000), Weibel (2022) discusses how 'communitas' and 'contestation' coexist and shape management practices in the village of Rocamadour in France. The author proves that contestation is not limited to the powerful and powerless but among groups that share different vested interests including local managers who promote a holiday/nostalgic destination, diocesan employees and nuns who endorse the holiness of the site, as well as the visitors' perception of the 'supernatural' that diverges from conventional Catholic practices. Such case studies demonstrate how host communities turn their sacred sites into cultural heritage without losing or denying their spiritual or divine

aspirations and are indicative of the ways local actors receive, institutionalise, appropriate and dovetail 'external' discourse with local needs. However, the impact of this mingling is yet to be fully understood. Drawing on North American Native heritage, Alaska, Bunten (2008) argues that although the promotion of traditional ceremonial system fosters cultural reproduction and economic benefits it also runs the risk of alienating those involved in self-commodification, leaving little room for resistance. As Howard (2003) pointed out, commodification is not easy to stop once the attraction is largely dependent on the spending of the visiting public.

However, claims about community-based approaches should be considered with caution, since public engagement in decision-making does not necessarily suggest shared responsibility and equal participation (Waterton, Smith, and Campbell 2006). For instance, examining China's spiritual sites, Zhu (2016) and Su, Song, and Sigley (2019) demonstrated how heritagization takes place within an instrumental top-down management system, where authorities identify what aspects of local 'authentic culture' should be preserved and promoted. Labadi (2013) pointed out, most European (UNESCO) nomination dossiers of religious sites focus on the role of Christian faith in the construction of national narratives that champion nationalist projections which exclude other faiths that existed in the continent, such as Islam. For example, the conversion of Hagia Sophia, in Istanbul, into a museum in the early twentieth century, allowing its spiritual neutralisation, and its recent re-establishment as a mosque at the expense of the international Orthodox Christian community, demonstrates how religious heritage is subject to politicisation and strong national narratives (Aykaç 2018; Rico 2021). An interesting study from North Cyprus highlights the dissonance in post-war disputed territories between coexisting faiths – the Christian South and the Muslim North. Saifi and Yüceer (2013) discuss the 'successful' reuse of 'abandoned' Christian churches as a process that guarantees the maintenance and enrichment of social value among new (Muslim) owners. However, this paper fails to consider the religious and national attachment the displaced Greek Christian Cypriot community holds with those sites, expressed through annual pilgrimages to the north (see Sabri and Sakalli 2021 on this subject). In certain instances, such as the case of Old Believers in Romania (Clopot 2020), communities reject institutional protection and, subsequently, state funding due to fears of cultural assimilation during listing that could affect the ownership and lead to a possible appropriation of their church.

Due to their strong symbolic power, religious sites are often subject to politicisation and instrumentalization by extremists that result in crimes against spiritual cultural property (Meskell 2018), whereby such holy sites constitute 'dissonant heritage' (Digance 2003). According to Schildgen (2008) this politicisation and radicalisation is caused by complex sociopsychological reasons (expressed through rage towards an alternative world view) and deeper political and economic forces that are considered threats to national stability. New practices have been developed as a response to such vandalism, including recent emergency interventions in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war through site documentation projects, public-awareness-raising projects, emergency training and mitigation projects (Quntar and Daniels 2016). The political instrumentalization of religious heritage to function as 'mnemonic product' (Nora 1989; Assmann and Czaplicka 1995), capable of creating commonly shared traditions and collective consciousness among heterogeneous groups (Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Coleman and Bowman 2019; Bhat 2019; Oliveira and Luzia 2020), requires further critical attention that would examine how religious tradition is 'sacralised through the notion of cultural patrimony' by social and political actors as a response to social transformations (Zubrycki 2012, 451). Nostalgia, 'the yearning for what is lacking in a changed present' has an 'empowering agency' to renew our relationship with the past as well as a critical potential in questioning the motives of those who mobilise it (Angé and Berliner 2015, 1–5). How religious heritage is converted into political capital, who mobilises those nostalgic narratives, which collective identities aim to mediate it and to what ends, is a vital issue of future research.

Heritagization is a context-specific and contextually determined process fuelled by power-laden discourses and conflicting vested interests. It is often the case that those experts who have control and authority over religious authorities expect faith and preservation to be considered on the same

moral grounds to (Rico 2021). The secularisation/commodification adopted by managers varies, with the chosen strategies being located on a continuum ranging from, at the one extreme, the demonstration of policies that adopt a more business-oriented model, and, at the other, self-effacing strategies that prioritise living practices, driven by revitalisation rather than development, as noted by Di Giovine (2010). The above-mentioned studies demonstrate that cultural sources are not always made subordinate to spiritual ones, as Coleman (2019) argued; the picture is more complex, wherein powerful hierarchies, authorised and sub-authorised discourses around living tradition, commodification and appropriation are dialectically transformed and operationalised into new social practices. However, Berliner (2013) and Coleman (2019) are equally correct in claiming that certain religious elements are more 'heritagizable' than others. While there are common factors in the way conservation planning for religious sites has been developed in different countries, it appears that power is not uniformly distributed, and each case has developed its own distinct Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD). Smith's theory of AHD (Smith 2006, 2009, 2011), examining who is excluded and included in heritage-making and how certain mentalities towards heritage resource management are authorised and privileged, could provide valuable insight into this field of study. AHD could help scholars avoid reductionist approaches that discuss tensions between stakeholders in binary terms, reconsidering how various discourses around religious sites are contested and validated. This includes the long struggle of Indigenous people for respect and recognition of their cultural rights as well as the suppression of other competing sub-AHDs (practitioners and policymakers) often found within the same organisation (Skrede and Hølleland 2018). Nevertheless, the difficulty in instilling the 'first voice' within conservation planning that rarely engages with the living heritage of local people, dismissing Indigenous conservation practices that favour material stasis (Galla 2008; Fong et al. 2012), is an inherent problem for UNESCO, thus reinforcing the role of nation states in displacing local interests (Meskell and Brumann 2015). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at the Great Mosque of Djenné in Mali, Joy (2012) highlighted how UNESCO's priority of commemorative value (outstanding universal value) over 'use value' imposes a bureaucratic vision of the past on local populations perpetuating colonial agendas. According to Ray (2012) such western interventions in India (Bodh Gaya), not only redefined the understanding of religious monuments from 'abodes of spiritual power' to objects of artistic beauty, but also changed the symbiotic linkage of religious landscapes by converting a multireligious site (comprising Hindu, Jain and Buddhist shrines) to a Buddhist one through legislation, conservation practices and linear historic development.

The number of empirical studies that address issues of planning policy is proportionately small compared to the most represented cultural asset on national and international (UNESCO) records. This is exacerbated by the uncertainty regarding the agency of traditional social actors to make choices and shape the development of religious destinations. This is demonstrated in the small number of empirical studies (18 out of 81) that have collected qualitative data from those involved in the day-to-day management of religious sites, while the number or studies retrieving data from religious leaders, is significantly smaller. For instance, as Isnart (2008) indicated, traditional clergy are often actively involved in the making of local religious heritage by combining heritage discourses and liturgical words. Investigating how heritage discourse is linked to the agency of religious leaders we could develop a deeper understanding of how the former empowers or disempowers the latter. For instance, taking an ethnographic approach, Isnart (2012, 2014, 2020) discusses how religious leaders and politicians (patrons of local collective memory), in Rhodes (Greece) and Southern France, draw on religious heritage (rituals, festivals, myths), to enhance their social position among locals and tourists. Such approaches open a new field of research into how religious heritage (tangible or intangible) is upgraded, receiving heritage-related connotations and promoting a return to religious content (Isnart 2008, 89). This absence, noted by other scholars (Stausberg 2011; Fattah and Eddy-U 2020; Olsen and Esplin 2020), may conceal how power configurations and competing discourses influence operational management including curatorial strategies, educational objectives, public engagement, and conservation. For instance, how do

funding, listing, and (selective) adherence to international conservation conventions form new power dynamics between traditional and new stakeholders? How the social structure of UNESCO shapes the concept of religious heritage and how it unbalances traditional assemblages, creating new social dynamics by favouring minimal intervention at the expense of living religion (Rico 2021) and unity over dissonance (Di Giovine 2008).

4.3 Visitors' perspectives

The two previous sections reviewed and discussed how the new social configurations and economic opportunities, which emerged from the progressive adaptation of religious sites to the demands of the heritage industry, have been assumed and contested by stakeholders. This section focusses on 'users', how scholars have addressed visitors' and local worshipers' responses to the heritagization of their religious sites, taking a closer look at the concept of authenticity. A substantial part of the literature investigates tourists' perceptions in an effort improve the service provision and infrastructure (McGettigan and Burns 2001; Rivera, Shani, and Severt 2009; Wiltshier and Clarke 2012; Othman, Petrie, and Power 2013; Rodrigues and McIntosh 2014; Wiltshier 2014; Marine-Roig 2015; Ndivo and Cantoni 2016; Kocyigit 2016; Canoves and Forga 2016), to examine the causality of commodification and authenticity (Andriotis 2009; Levi and Kocher 2012; Dora 2012), and decipher the relationship between motivation, experience and behaviour (Abbate and Nuovo 2013; Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel 2015; Irimias, Mitev, and Michalko 2016; Božic et al. 2016; Banica 2016; Orekat 2016; Öter and Çetinkaya 2016; Ramírez and Fernández 2018; Duda and Doburzynski 2019). A common aspect of these studies is the creation of the 'religious visitor profile', delving into visitors' spiritual and secular motives, demographics, expectations and satisfaction. For example, studies such as Irimias, Mitev, and Michalko (2016), Banica (2016) and Davison and Russell (2017), reported significant variations between senior and young travellers, with the former expressing greater interest in nationhood and learning about the site's history, while the latter consider religious sites as places of cultural regeneration. Others (Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel 2015; Öter and Çetinkaya 2016) established a correlation between religious affiliation and behaviour, arguing that a stronger sense of place is demonstrated for those able to show a personal attachment with the place.

An important body of literature sought to investigate the causality between authenticity and commodification. Surveys such as those by McGettigan and Burns (2001) at the Clonmacnoise monastery in Ireland, and Levi and Kocher's (2012) study examining the perception of Western tourists in Thailand, found that commercial activities and standardised marketing are major distractions that are detrimental to the perception of sacredness. Similarly, in a comparative study utilising mixed-method approach, at the monastic complexes of Mount Athos and Meteora in Greece, Dora (2012) reported that the commodification of religious destinations sparks greater discontent among tourists, since touristification and modernisation are reminders of the everydayness from which they are trying to escape. To this end, Lyratzaki (2006) and Dora (2012) maintained that the ascetic life of monastic communities suffered a blow by the hordes of tourists. Similar issues have been addressed by Joseph and Kavoori (2001), Griffiths (2011) and Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel (2015), who have highlighted some evidence of annoyance and discord among pilgrims and local worshipers towards misbehaving tourists, while Di Giovine (2010) reported discontent among locals regarding tourist initiatives at Pietrelcina (Italy) driven by 'staging' and commodification. A similar example can be observed at the Shaolin temple in Zhengzhou, China (Su, Song, and Sigley 2019), where local religious-based authenticity is neglected due to economic modernisation and Western conservation criteria that disempower residents. Often this discomfort takes the form of a mediated resistance where, although locals participate individually, as a collective they condemn desacralisation, to alleviate the sense of guilt that circumvents the need for direct action (Joseph and Kavoori 2001). However, a different view is given by other scholars such as Griffiths (2011), in Australia, Wong, McIntosh, and Ryan (2013) in

China and Rodrigues and McIntosh (2014), in relation to the Catholic monastery of Tyburn in New Zealand, who argued that despite spiritual disturbance and conservation issues, local parishes and monastic communities do not consider visitors a burden. In this line of thought, examining religious tourism at Mount Athos in Greece, Andriotis (2009) provides a new angle to the causality between commodification and authenticity. According to Andriotis (2009), the levels of commodification should not be considered an indicator of how authentic a shrine is, as authenticity is a deeply personal experience susceptible to factor such as socialisation, culture, learning, and the natural environment.

Scholars have also ventured out to investigate how visitors respond to the interpretation provided at religious sites. Empirical research in the field (Rivera, Shani, and Severt 2009; Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2009; Hughes, Bond, and Ballantyne 2013; Marine-Roig 2015; Irimias, Mitev, and Michalko 2016; Božic et al. 2016; Duda and Doburzynski 2019) indicate that visitors benefit from pluralistic interpretations that balance spiritual and secular information to enhance a multisensory experience. However, as already discussed, this represents a difficult task. Both qualitatively (Voase 2007) and quantitatively driven strategies (Francis et al. 2008; Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2009) at Lincoln Cathedral, St Davis Cathedral (Wales) and at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, have highlighted visitors' weariness towards information that concentrates on historical events, calling for more 'affective' interpretations and underlining the role of interpretation as a facilitator of emotional experience. I argue that more work is needed in this direction, examining for instance whether physical labels are distractive, what main subjects ought to be taught and how we should induce visitors into questioning new ethical and social needs towards current economic, political, and social problems at religious sites. Despite substantial steps that have been made in this domain, interpretation remains one of the great vices of ecclesiastical heritage management (Thouki 2019; Aulet and Vidal 2018).

While authenticity is often taken for granted, it remains a very contradictory and contested notion and is rooted in specific sociocultural contexts (Labadi 2010). MacCannell's (1973) thesis on 'staged authenticity' has been influential in this literature. Regarding religious built heritage the concept of authenticity has been recruited by a number of scholars to explore various facets of heritagization. Some scholars examine the efforts of religious managers to create and maintain authentic religious experience vis-à-vis that of commodification (Olsen 2003; Bremer 2004; Stausberg 2011). Others take a more visitor-centred approach investigating how, in their quest for authenticity, tourists and pilgrims project certain values and expectations on to religious destinations (Dora 2012; Jimura 2016). For instance, in certain cults, such as that of Mazu, in mainland China and Taiwan, believers consider the revival of such local cults as 'staged', questioning the authenticity of statues (Chang 2021). Another group of scholars examined how the issue of authenticity fuels contestation and competing discourses between those who consider authenticity as an embodied and evolving process and those who utilise it as a benchmark to advocate cultural heritage management that 'freezes' time and space (Joy 2012; Su, Song, and Sigley 2019). However, the position that authentic tourist experience is compromised by purposeful deceptive staging has been challenged by various authors who argued that visitors are not just passive observers. Taylor (2001) argued that tourists are in search of meaningful experience to engage in a 'sincere experiential' cultural exchange in ways that host communities deem acceptable (McIntosh and Johnson 2005). Cohen (1988), meanwhile, is opposed to the assumption that commodification destroys authenticity, arguing that over time such practices may acquire a patina of authenticity (emergent authenticity). One such example is the commodification of Dogon's (Mali) material culture, where handmade masks, textiles and wood carvings, manufactured in the presence of tourists, convey the living culture that metalises the identity of the local people (Douny 2018). This debate found its way into growing body of religious tourism literature (Arellano 2007; Belhassen, Caton, and Stewart 2008; Andriotis 2009; Zhu 2012) which seeks to examine authenticity as a personal, embodied and constantly evolving notion subject to activity and/or symbolic language (Wang 1999). Reflecting on this complex scenario, there is room within religious heritage scholarship to consider authenticity

as a multidimensional and evolving concept determined by the visitors' personal valuations (memories, emotions, expectations), cultural influences and national history, as well as an experience embodied through the interaction between buildings, souvenirs and ceremonies (Park, Choib, and Leec 2019; Dai, Zheng, and Juan 2021). Considering authenticity as a negotiable concept instead of 'staged', future work should take into account that tourists are not just passive recipients seeking pseudo-events, but rather conscious travellers seeking life-changing experience (Di Giovine 2008), while for host communities, authenticity is a developing concept – a creative engagement that makes past traditions relevant to the present, thus contributing to a sense of identity (Alivizatou 2012; Zhu 2012).

The difficulty in addressing the contingent and contextual character of authenticity is partially down to the methodological choices employed. From a methodological standpoint, scholars have used predominantly quantitative techniques in the form of surveys, in an effort to examine how visitors interact emotionally, spiritually, and physically with the place. One problem with this kind of application is that the human experience runs the risk of being oversimplified when it is subjected to quantification, categorised according to rigid dichotomies (pilgrims and tourists or religious and secular motivations), concealing other microhistories that could escape the attention of social scientists, such as how people are constrained by ideational structures such as moral or religious beliefs (McAnulla 2006). As Badone and Sharon (2004) argued, such rigid dichotomies which are often the key in distinguishing tourists from pilgrims, could be substantially contradictory, leaving unanswered questions and leading to a reductionist line of reasoning dismissive of conditions such as, for example, gender, class, and education mould people's religious beliefs and practices (Berliner 2013): How do pre-entrance narratives and religiosity affect levels of immersion in active and non-active churches? How do non-religious driven visitors perceive spirituality? And how might traditional pilgrims respond to the secularisation of their sacrament? Binary approaches fail to capture pilgrimage as a 'valuistic journey' – an arena of competing discourses (Eade and Michael 1991), where the performative and evolving character of pilgrimage is shaped by an interaction of the pilgrim environment and various levels of religious engagement (Damari and Yoel 2016; Terzidou, Scarles, and Saunders 2018; Griffiths and Korstanje 2021; Liutikas 2021).

5. Discussion

Driven by critical heritage theory, advocating a better understanding of the multiplicity of discourses at historic sites, the present paper reviewed and synthesised a growing body of literature, addressing the management of religious sites, in an effort to broaden current knowledge regarding the underlying dialectics of religious heritage. All three themes reviewed in this paper essentially focused on unpacking the discursive nature of heritagisation at both the micro and the macro level. The three conceptual themes indicated a fragmented scene among domestic and international social structures, traditional and new social actors, host communities and tourists, indicative of the endemic character of heritagization. This fragmentation, marked by new social configurations and economic opportunities, highlighted the new social role acquired by religious sites, as places of escapism and enculturation, and emphasising the overlapping uses of heritage sites as spiritual, economic, social, political, and symbolic resource. A prominent research inquiry in the literature is the commodification of religious sites. This is evident in the interest shown by scholars in investigating managers' efforts to mitigate the negative and positive implications of secular tourism (operational management), the image they craft (interpretation), the efforts to keep their 'attractions' competitive in the heritage industry, providing strategic religious tourist development (service delivery), and the broader social dynamics that emerge from the conservation and interpretation of those sites (policy making). The literature showcases a diverse range of methodological focus, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and geographical and thematic spread, dominated by European religious sites (favouring surveys with visitors and interviews with social actors) followed by Southeast Asian sites (where ethnographic studies are prominent), while Islamic sites are not

equally represented. As Fattah and Eddy-U (2020) noted, the minimal academic interest in Islamic sites on issues of host/guest relationships is related to the stance taken by Islamic countries towards tourist development (in terms of infrastructure and promotion) that discourage tourist consumption and, consequently, research interest. However, with some notable exceptions from Southeast Asia, whose ethnographic conservation approach provided a fertile ground for the reconsideration of Eurocentric notions of 'authenticity' and 'integrity'; a less discussed issue in the literature is the evolving relationship between authenticity and conservation.

Discussions regarding authenticity and conservation could assist in developing a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making process (Taylor 2001; Yi et al. 2018), as well as providing avenues on how certain discourses are legitimised over others (Alberts and Hazen 2010). By revisiting issues of conservation at religious sites through the eyes of producers and consumers, research can shift the discourse towards the materiality of religious heritage, giving new insight in debates including 'preserve as found' vs aesthetic restoration, living tradition vs preventing conservation, staging and gentrification vs museumification. As Vinas (2002) argued, discussions around conservation reveal what we value more today and what destination images we want to craft (Vinas 2002). This perspective is in line with 'communicative turn' or 'value-based conservation', advocated by contemporary conservation theory, where objectivism is replaced by intersubjectivity (Vinas 2002) and the significance of the object rests on the values and meanings people ascribe to them (Jokilehto 1999; Konsa 2015). Despite its evolving character, heritage is subject to the skills, knowledge, and preferences of producers (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Farrellya, Kockb, and Josiassen 2019). The theistic beliefs and cultural tradition of various religions could increase awareness on how host communities and visitors with different philosophical and material approaches perceive continuity and change at religious destinations. For instance, the limited presence of accounts given by traditional clergy in the data represents an important limitation that exemplifies the difficulty scholars face in addressing the living dimension of religious heritage. Working from the starting point of the Nara Document that broadens the definition of authenticity as well as the epistemological standards to establish what is considered truth (Boccardi 2019), future research could put greater emphasis on the discursive nature of religious heritage, which has received limited attention.

Considering religious heritage conservation as an assemblage (Pendlebury 2013) and acknowledging internal relations of interdependence that give rise to new causal powers (Sayer 2013), future research could provide a more holistic approach towards the complexities and competitions that occur during heritagization. Such complexities involve parties that embody different value systems and vested interests (monastic communities vs professional institutions, heritage professionals vs living host communities), lack of resources and expertise, inadequacy to share the vision with local communities, insufficient planning framework, ownership (legal framework and how listing shifts the balance of power) and theistic limiters among others. In this regard, the non-reductionist and non-deterministic epistemological stance of Critical Realism could provide a promising research framework. Investigating the causal configuration of mechanisms in generating empirical complexities, as well as the contextual and contingent ways in which they are activated (Sayer 1992) future research could shed light on how mechanisms are triggered, disrupted, or reinforce each other producing discourses around heritage conservation that construct and perpetuate certain AHDs. Such an explanatory and theory-informed approach, seeking why a certain phenomenon exists (Fletcher 2020), may take a critical stance towards various social practices comprising 'heritagization' (i.e. 'preserve as found' conservation strategy) and the social institutions responsible for these practices, as well as the factors that enable and inhibit stakeholder engagement in the management of (contested) religious sites. By acknowledging these mechanisms and the contextual and contingent way in which they are activated, researchers could be more attentive to the constant struggle between social structures. How their positions are constructed (Di Giovine 2015) and how these are shaped by ontological presuppositions and different realities (Harrison 2013, 2015) such as the unique relationships Indigenous people have developed with the natural world based on oral

tradition, performativity, and material embodiment of sacred powers (Wright 2013). Thus, considering heritagization as a 'laminated phenomenon' (Elder-Vass 2010), scholars can elucidate the particular ways various parties, including institutions, powerful social actors, and other discourses are organised in particular relations.

The same critique can be applied in relation to the 'users' of religious sites. As the bar chart illustrates (Figure 1), the bulk of the studies addressing issues of 'visitors' perspectives' (devotees' and tourists' responses and attitudes towards current strategies) are driven primarily by positivist-empiricist quantitative studies. Comprised primarily of survey techniques that focus on regularities between variables and selected subsets (secular vs sacred), these studies fail to consider the context-dependent nature of consciousness, and preconceived ideas of authenticity that may influence meaning-making among visitors (Sayer 1992; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Maxwell 2009). The over-reliance on survey techniques runs the risk of reducing the multivocality at religious sites, failing to capture those discourses that aim to revitalise religious tradition and claim the past (Isnart and Cerezales 2020) and those who recall 'fading' religious memories to re-negotiate and adopt religious tradition to a new future. Approaching 'users' as passive recipients, dominant narratives that determine what heritage is and how it should be managed are perpetuated (Smith 2006), underlying a metanarrative that regards religious sites as marketable hybrid attractions. A similar critique was made by Griffiths and Korstanje (2021) who, drawing on Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and MacCannell, maintained that there is a meta-discourse in the study of religious tourism, fixed within the tourist consciousness that treats tourists' feelings and experiences as unimportant sources of information for researchers. According to Singh, Kumar, and Rana (2021) such quantitative literature fails to capture how tourists understand and practice spirituality at sacred landscapes (or sacredscapes) where ritualised practices and cultural performances are interconnected with the spirit of the place (genius loci).

The quantification of human experience may conceal latent voices hidden beneath researchers' assumptions, overlooking buried narratives. Where do visitors draw a line between gentrification and integrity (contextual continuity)? Does the rearrangement or removal of religious furniture, or the introduction of new technologies turn those sites into museum pieces, accelerating their secularisation and hindering living practices? Do visitors perceive ageing, weathering or even damage as part of authenticity? What ideas can be evoked by signs of decay [patina, moss or roots entwined with masonry] (Lowenthal 1985, 173)? How

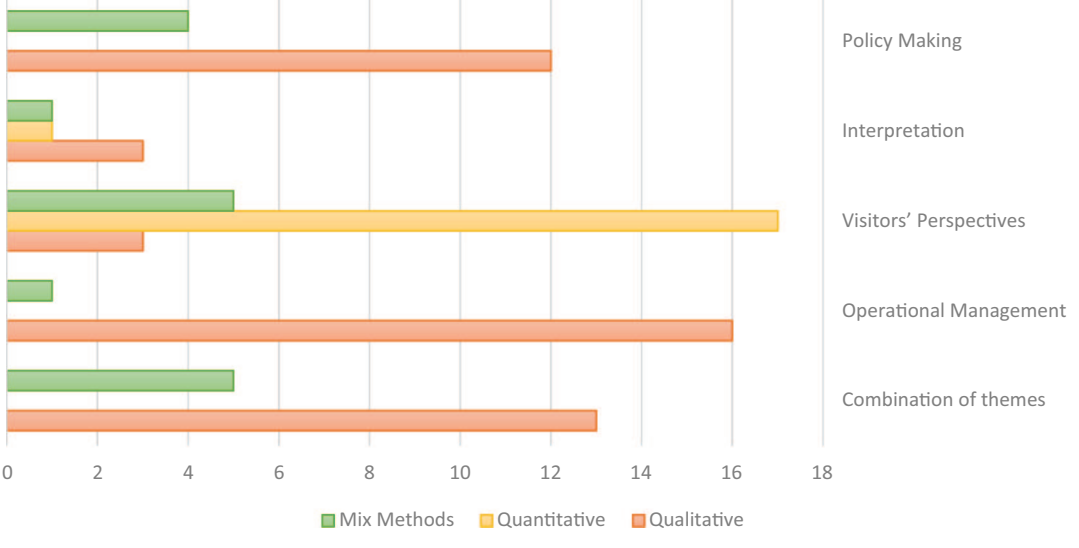

Figure 1. Methodological trends.

does freezing religious sites to ensure the intactness of the fabric impact their living character and how is the 'conserve as found' strategy grasped? Questions such as these can capture the dynamic, manipulable, and contingent character of authenticity – how churches mediate affective and cognitive experience and how visitors respond with their own agency. The literature has provided evidence that heritage practices at religious sites are challenged by 'users' on issues related to commodification (Di Giovine 2012; Dora 2012; Levi and Kocher 2012; Su, Song, and Sigley 2019) and presentation (Voase 2007; Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2009), indicating that visitors are not passive recipients of the changes occurring at religious sites. More studies like these could provide insights into alternative or competing accounts regarding the current preservationist culture, which embraces a fabric-based conservation ethos and favours objective truth over living practices (Jokilehto 1999). For instance, in a rare study related to heritage conservation in Europe (Denmark), Brajer (2008) reported that parishioners' and visitors' preference over the aesthetic restoration of murals is motivated by feelings of national pride and aesthetic completeness rather than religious reasons, underscoring the primacy of visual qualities over spiritual ones. Such studies can redefine the relationship between ecclesiastical heritage, authenticity, and conservation in the context of a post-Christian, European, secularised society where religion has lost its traditional hegemony (Harding 2019) and aesthetics has become a prominent 'cultural sphere of value' (Habermas 2002, 84) in public consciousness.

The separation of intangible heritage from material culture leads only to misconceptions of cultural practices and traditions (Zhu 2021). In recent years, the focus has shifted towards intangible aspects of cultural heritage and human agency (Joy 2012) in an effort to offset the elitists practices that prevailed in UNESCO's actions in the first decades, prioritising expertise knowledge in line with modernist conservation theory (Cameron and Mechtild 2013; Brumann 2018). Such endeavours include the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICHC 2003), which envisages to protect intangible heritage including religious/spiritual/sacred knowledge and practices/rituals and ensure cultural diversity by promoting collaboration with Indigenous people (Marrie 2009). It is also important for qualitative research to be reflective of its own practice. According to Denzin and Giardina, 'neo-colonial' epistemologies and methodologies that ascribe 'otherness' to indigenous people with the aim of to 'empowering' and 'emancipating' those subjugated voices should be replaced by participatory methodologies that aim to listen and ascribe agency to the Indigenous people, prioritising 'subjectivity, personal knowledge and performative view of meaning' (Denzin and Giardina 2007, 14). Discussing issues of planning and heritage conservation, Mason (2008) argues that the subjectivity and contingency of heritage values calls on researchers to rethink their conceptual bases and methodological stances and acknowledge the interdependence and overlapping nature of economic and sociocultural values utilising ethnographic-economic methodologies. A qualitative approach that documents the performative character of religious tourism could, as Zhang and Smith (2019) pointed out, develop a better understanding of visitors' agency and even challenge traditional tourist typologies. If we accept that religious visitors are active and mindful of the socio-cultural changes taking place at those sites, then how the site-specific policies and management strategies are adopted and shape the visitor narratives are worth exploring. The living character of religious sites reinforces the importance of how heritage is experienced and embodied with nonverbal elements, feelings, and emotions (Chabbra, Healy, and Sills 2003; Smith and Waterton 2009; Wells 2010). This can fall within an epistemological framework that embraces 'analytical dualism' (Archer 1995). An analytical distinction between (social and cultural) structures and agency could enable social researchers to understand how visitors and host communities exercise agency by making sense of discourses embodied in social practices and how they respond to/challenge or even enact change in AHDs that frame religious sites as heritage.

6. Conclusion

This study deepens our understanding of the relationship between heritagization and religion, as well as providing an overview of the current state of research in this field, highlighting overlooked areas. Drawing on Critical Heritage Theory, the synthetic-integrative approach was aimed at exploring the discursive traditions and the multipositionality of social actors and visitors, found at religious sites today. The findings from this study indicate that the field of 'heritagization of religious sites' embodies a multitude of research inquiries, most prominently the commodification of sacred sites, which examines how the new hybrid status quo is contested, mitigated and, in certain cases, embraced by different stakeholders and visitors. However, issues of conservation and authenticity have evidently received less attention in two neglected and conceptually underdeveloped areas. Firstly, how religious heritage consumers (whether constrained or enabled) respond to the conservation ethos found at religious settings, and secondly, how the latter is shaped by competing narratives, conflicting interests, and new allegiances found within new conservation planning assemblages. This study contends that by re-examining the issue of authenticity and conservation as an evolving notion, scholars can develop a more nuanced understanding of whether the current management strategies are representative of the diversity of social, cultural, and spiritual experiences. By ascribing agency to producers and users, future research can provide new insights into how religious 'historical consciousness' is developing under the pressure of contemporary heritage uses. This would prevent the reduction of 'religious heritage' to a modern phenomenon (Harvey 2001; Smith 2006) that restricts the analytical focus on commodification and management practices, concealing debates regarding the ethical judgements of social actors (how people preserve, restore and ignore heritage) and coexistent ontologies. Thus, reconsidering the epistemological base in which 'religious heritage making' takes place as well as striving for a better integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods, religious heritage discourse can be broadened, empowering traditional social actors and marginalised groups whose 'intangible' interests have been overlooked by research. Such an approach will bring scholars back to the drawing board to reconsider the changing aspirations and perceptions of what the religious environment is for and what it should represent (Ashworth 2008) and contribute to the ongoing debate regarding the 'ambitious scope' of value-based conservation (Poulios 2010), especially in areas where development is perceived as a threat to the sanctity of the place and living practices.

Acknowledgement

This article is the product of my ongoing doctoral research at the University of Sheffield. I would like to thank the editor of the International Journal of Heritage Studies Prof Laurajane Smith, and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments which helped to greatly improve the quality of the paper. Additionally, I would like to thank my supervisors Prof. Hossein Olya and Dr. Steve Connelly for their continued support and guidance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Alexis Thouki is an archaeologist and PhD candidate at Sheffield University. Alexis's research focuses primarily on the 'heritagization' of religious sites through the lens of Critical Heritage Theory and Critical Realism. The primary focus of his research is a critical reflection of the production and consumption of ecclesiastical heritage, looking at how competing discourses and processes legitimise certain practices as opposed to others.

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